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Letter to the Editor of National Defense University, from SGT Mounir Elkhamri, FMSO-JRIC analyst. This letter was previously published in *Joint Force Quarterly*, Issue 44, 1st quarter 2007.

To the Editor: I recently completed an 18-month tour of duty in Iraq, where I served at a logistics site, with a Special Forces A Team, with a maneuver battalion, and as a personal interpreter and cultural advisor to the commander of Task Force Freedom, a two-star command. This variety of jobs was possible due to my fluency in Arabic and familiarity with Arabic culture. I wanted to share some insights from my experience in Iraq in order to help deploying units, or those already there, better understand what we are doing right and what we can do better.

After 3 years in Iraq, it is clear that the coalition forces' main mission has switched primarily from leading the fight against the growing insurgency to preparing the new Iraqi security forces to assume the counterinsurgency fight. It is a demanding and complicated mission to execute since it not only requires the coalition commander's expertise, professionalism, and support, but also depends tremendously on our Iraqi counterparts' will, dedication to their military, and their loyalty to Iraq itself. Therefore, during the first few months in country, coalition commanders should spend ample time interfacing with their Iraqi counterparts to build trust and confidence and to assess their loyalty, leadership, skills, and readiness level.

During the first few months, coalition commanders should seize every invitation for lunch, dinner, or simply a cup of tea or coffee with their Iraqi counterparts in order to build a bridge of trust and confidence. These meetings should go beyond lunches and dinners. Consider organizing joint activities such as soccer, group runs, picnics, and social gatherings; these activities create opportunities for American troops, their leadership, and their Iraqi counterparts to interact, bond, and feel more comfortable about working together. During my tour in northern Iraq, I found out that celebrating holidays such as Ramadan, Nowrooz (the Kurdish new year), Thanksgiving, and the 4th of July with Iraqi counterparts has positive impacts.

The loyalty of our Iraqi security counterpart is something that local coalition commanders need to monitor closely because disloyalty can be a significant detriment to the combat readiness of the Iraqi security forces. If we compare and contrast the old and new Iraqi forces, we find that the old one consisted of a majority of Sunnis and a minority of Shias and Kurds, but they were all loyal to the country of Iraq and the regime (all Iraqi soldiers—Sunni, Shia, and Kurd— fought for their country during the Iraq-Iran war and Operation *Desert Storm*).

Today, we have the same mix of soldiers, but the percentages have changed along with loyalties. The new forces are led by politicians and sectarian leaders who have separate political agendas. These agendas hurt the new Iraqi security forces by disrupting unity of command and primary loyalty to the country of Iraq and its flag.

During my tour in the northern area of Iraq, I witnessed numerous situations where lack of loyalty to Iraq was evident in both the Iraqi army and the Iraqi police. Soldiers who were once Peshmerga (Kurdish soldiers) were incorporated into the new Iraqi army but continued to wear the flag of Kurdistan on their uniforms. Kurdish senior officers will often have a Kurdish flag and a picture of either Mustafa Barzani or Jalal Talabani (prominent Kurdish leaders of different political parties) in their offices.

It was almost impossible to meet a Kurdish member of the new Iraqi security forces who did not owe his loyalty to a specific political party, tribe, or personal agenda. Sometimes, even units in the Iraqi security forces secretly conduct operations under the guidance and orders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan or Kurdistan Democratic Party. This is especially true in the north, where the majority of the security forces are Kurds.

A large number of Kurdish commanders continue to draw a paycheck from Iraq and another from the Kurdistan government, since they are still considered to be part of the Peshmerga forces. In some cases, the heads of political parties in the north reprimanded battalion, brigade, or division commanders because they had taken corrective actions against their subordinate commanders who followed the party agenda. Weak leadership and politicians' involvement in the Iraqi military outside of the chain of command can have a tremendous influence on the soldiers' loyalty and organization readiness.

Similar situations have been reported in the south, where Iraqi soldiers display pictures of the scholar Muqtada Al Sadr on their weapons and patrol vehicles. The Ministry of Interior forces, along with Shia death squads (the Badr and Mehdi brigades), openly conduct operations that target Sunni officials, Sunni scholars, and air force pilots who participated in the Iraq-Iran war. These acts are Shia retribution for long-term Sunni domination under Saddam Hussein.

Today, the new Iraqi security forces recruitment, promotion, and assignments are not based on merit, military education, or qualification, but instead rely more on the political party with which the soldier is affiliated. This approach results in recruiting and promoting soldiers and commanders who are weak. It also slows down training and coalition efforts.

During my time in Iraq and through my long conversations with the Iraqis, I discovered that if you are not Kurdish, it is very hard to get a job in today's northern Iraqi forces, and in case you do get to apply, the administrative office in the Ministry of Defense may not process your application. Also, you may end up serving for months without getting paid, and of course you can only do that for so long before finding another way to provide for your family.

Sometimes Iraqi commanders with limited leadership ability used their command for personal gain and influence. Moreover, they failed to establish an effective command and control system over their organization despite repeated coaching and clear directives from their coalition forces partners. These leaders continued their military assignments without any action taken against them because they were affiliated with one of the strong political parties in Iraq. This is counter to the coalition forces initiatives for training and operations.

Local coalition commanders cannot rely solely on the Iraqi Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Interior to train and equip the new Iraqi army. Both ministries face budget constraints, corruption, sectarian differences, favoritism, lack of accountability, and nationalism. Local coalition

commanders should take the initiative to train their Iraqi counterparts even if it is not part of their mission.



SGT Elkhamri attends meeting with U.S. and Iraqi government officials.

An approach that was very successful in northern Iraq (in the Tigris River valley south of Mosul) was the creation of a basic training course for both army and police forces. New Iraqi recruits learned basic marksmanship, first aid, close-quarter combat, map reading, checkpoint procedures, dismounted patrolling, military decisionmaking processes, prisoner interaction, and physical training. Also, coalition commanders founded a noncommissioned officer academy for advanced training. These early initiatives allowed both

the coalition and their Iraqi counterparts to meld effectively and made both forces feel more comfortable during combined operations.

When Iraqi security forces are involved in gathering intelligence, planning operations, and leading operations, we find not only evidence but also insurgents that we were never able to get ourselves. This does not mean that the coalition forces do not have the capability to carry out these tasks alone but simply shows how much the Iraqis can contribute to the success of the fight because of their knowledge of the language, terrain, people, and culture. There were rumors that sometimes the Iraqi security forces were not fully complying with the Geneva Conventions—this is something that continues to be the focus of our trainers in both basic and advanced training.

The involvement of the Iraqi counterparts in the early stages of operation planning through execution allows them to understand how to conduct military operations better, why we conduct them the way we do, and the importance of each phase in the success of the overall mission. This is true whether it is gathering and analyzing intelligence, creating the mission operations order, planning the logistics side of the mission, or writing an after action report.

Involvement also allows coalition force commanders to monitor their counterparts' progress closely since they spend more time with them than before. The combined intelligence phase (gathering and analyzing intelligence) is always critical to the coalition commander's decisionmaking process. Joint discussions with counterparts, along with separate engagement with the sheiks or *mokhtars* of the area, allow the commander either to decide whether a combined operation is required or to allow the sheik, *mokhtar*, or imam to deal with the problem or convince a suspect to turn himself in for questioning.

The local coalition commander needs to know what is going on since there are many opportunities for graft and abuse. Since Iraq's new government is busy fighting sectarian divisions

and corruption within its ministries, a large number of Iraqi commanders continue to use their command position for financial gain. This costs the Iraqis and the coalition forces millions of dollars every month—money that could provide more uniforms, vehicles, and equipment for the Iraqi security forces. Two particular cases come to mind.

First, there have been numerous situations where Iraqi commanders in both the police and army claimed that their companies, battalions, or brigades have a greater number of soldiers than they really have in order to draw more money from the coalition or the ministry. Investigations conducted by the Defense and Interior ministries revealed thousands of fake names with some of them belonging to babies, children, and the elderly. The challenge is that no actions have been taken to correct the issue.

Second, due to the lack of tight judicial controls, there is the potential for false arrest and subsequent release after payment of a bribe. Furthermore, terrorists may be able to buy their way out of prison if control systems are not closely monitored.

During my tour in Iraq, I was able to work closely with numerous coalition commanders. The most successful ones were those who were aware of what went on in their areas of operation and what went on behind the scenes with their Iraqi counterparts. Today's violence is not only the result of insurgents, but it is also a result of sectarian differences, corruption, loyalties, bad politics, and weak leadership. Therefore, local commanders need to be fully aware of what goes on around them in order to keep stability in their areas.

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